

Isaiah 42:5-9 ~ Matthew 3:13-17

*The Touch of Water*

Baptism of the Lord ~ Congregational Reaffirmation of Baptism ~ January 8, 2023

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*Introduction to Gospel Reading*

Did you ever notice how Jesus grows up really fast in the Gospels and in our church year? Last week, he was a baby and this week, he's all grown up, heading out to start his first day on the job as Messiah. We don't get to hear about when he takes his first step as a little "waddler." But in today's gospel reading, we do get to hear his first words on his first day on the job according to Matthew. They are not "Ma-ma" or "Da-da." Or "Go, Dog Go." Or, "Go Pack Go." Or maybe they were... We don't really know, of course. What we *do* know is where he chose to go and what he chose to have done to him on that first day. His first step, according to all four gospels, when he began his earthly ministry. And we have his first words said to John the Baptist at edge of the river Jordan. The words that convinced John to consent, against his objections, to be the one to baptize Jesus. So John dips the all grown-up Jesus down into the river and as John pulls him up from the water, we hear God's first words to Jesus. It wasn't exactly, "You got this." Actually, it was better.

*Sermon*

Damar Hamlin. Not being a huge football fan, I confess I had had never heard of the Buffalo Bills Safety, Damar Hamlin, until last Tuesday morning. That was when I first heard the news about his shocking cardiac arrest on the field, Monday night. His collapse after a routine tackle took everyone by surprise. The game ended after his collapse; and then later that week was cancelled. Doctors and medical assistants from both sides rushed to save him. That night and each day of this week, there was an outpouring of prayers and love from everyone: all teams, the whole NFL, people across every spectrum, yearning for this young athlete to survive and come back to us whole. And today, we are breathing a collective sigh of relief and gratitude. On Saturday Damar was able to post on Twitter himself, "love is felt & extremely real. No matter race or religion everybody coming together in prayer." Damar was no longer a stranger to practically anyone. Including me.

There are many wonderful aspects to this story of Damar Hamlin that are still unfolding. The one I see in the context of Jesus' baptism and ours, is this: I marvel at how the trauma of one young man has drawn us together, washing away for the moment the divides and the binaries by which we usually navigate our lives. Winners and losers. Strangers and friends. Football fans or not. Jews and Gentiles. Insiders and outsiders. Washed and unwashed. None of those customary divisions mattered: Everyone was pulling for him.

More likely than not, you are rooting for the Packers to win against the Detroit Lions tonight on Lambeau field and clinch a playoff spot in their game. Besides the green and gold vs. all others divide, we have numerous other ones, not as fun, that we navigate daily. Yet right here, from Day 1 on the job, Jesus came to teach us, Jesus came to show us, something deeper than our divides. At our core, we are God's beloved child. Every one of us. And all of us.

Underneath all those ways we divide ourselves, this is the only identity that really matters. I know, look around at the world, at our nation, our government, our community, our work, our school, our church, and our families, and most of the time all we see are differences. Are you this or that? Are you in or out? Are you one of us, or one of them? But Jesus is calling us to go deeper. When we touch the water of baptism, we can tap into the river of our shared human birthright. Our core identity.

Yet shamefully and ironically, over the past two thousand years we Christians we have managed to turn baptism into a litmus test. A sorting hat of sorts. Which kind of baptism is correct: Infant or believers' baptism. Does it have to be full immersion; or will just a little dab do the trick? What if the priest or pastor didn't say the right words. Did it take. Or not. We have gummed up the very sacrament that Jesus gave us to wash the binaries away. We have taken baptism, this sign of radical inclusion and invitation into the work of God's kingdom on earth, and used it to divide, to judge, to condemn. And not only to divide Christians from other religions, the so called "washed and unwashed," but also to divide and judge within the Christian community. How could we mess this up so badly?

Let's get back to Jesus' first words. Did you catch them? They were his explanation to John, his call to John to let go of his operative binary: "You are the Messiah and I am just John, a dime a dozen prophet, I should not be baptizing you." To which Jesus replied: "Let it be so for now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." John knew exactly what Jesus was talking about. That was all John needed to hear. Jesus had come to break the logjams that had built up in his own tradition. Logjams that were blocking the core word, "righteousness," (or *tsdq* in Hebrew) from flowing as Isaiah described it in our first lesson.

When we hear the word, "righteousness" and we often go right to the idea of someone being "self-righteous." Or we might just stop listening because it's one of those churchy words that we're never quite sure what it means. *Tsdq*, righteousness, is found 525 times in the Old Testament. And in Matthew it was Jesus' first word. Good reason to give it another look. Jesus came to the river's edge, that first day on the job, to break loose the institutional interference in his own tradition. Righteousness simply means being in "right relationship" with God, humans and all creation. Right relationship means loving God and neighbor, placing the interests of all (all people and all creation) above one's own desires and indulgences. Righteous people live in community to sustain and promote the well-being of the whole community. That's what righteousness meant to Jesus.

How was Jesus "fulfilling" (one of Matthew's favorite words – he uses 16 times in his Gospel) all righteousness with his first step to into the river to be baptized by John? He was breaking boundaries and binaries right and left. First of all, rather than choosing to head to the Temple in Jerusalem to the traditional power center of his faith, he headed out to the wilderness, the river Jordan to be baptized and to begin setting his agenda. From the start, Jesus was opening the flow between heaven and earth not only for his chosen people of Israel but Gentiles too: everyone else. Our reading in Isaiah helps to remind us, that Jesus' baptism was the initiation, not of something "brand new" but rather a new phase of God's ongoing activity on

earth. The opening, the expanding of the God's covenant to us. He was proclaiming our adoption, as Gentiles, into God's plan for Israel. It is all too easy for us to forget, now 2,000 years later that we were the strangers that were being welcomed, with that voice, that dove, that water. We were changing from strangers to friends from that first step, that first word of Jesus at the Jordan.

So, how does baptism really change things for us? A brief scene in the wonderful 1983 movie, *Tender Mercies*, still pops into my mind when I think about this question. Robert DuVall played the character of Mac, a down on his luck country songwriter who battles alcoholism. He fights back with the help of a young widow who offers him room and board at her roadside Texas hotel in exchange for handyman help. Eventually both Mac and her young boy, Sonny, make the decision to be baptized. Driving home after the baptism, From the back seat, Sonny says to Mac, "Well, we done it Mac. We was baptized." Peering into the truck's rearview mirror, Sonny studies himself for a moment, "everybody said I'd feel like a changed person. Do you feel like a changed person?" "Not yet," replies Mac. "You don't look any different, Mac." "Do you think I look any different?" "Not yet," answers Mac.

Like the way water shapes rock—it doesn't happen all at once or quickly. Identity shaping, renewal, revisioning takes time. We have so much to unlearn. Labels that have shaped and distorted the beautiful truth of who we really are. Beloved community, our identity as children of God is informed by God's character. Our Divine Parent God who is beyond the binary; God who cannot be contained by one name, one gender, one political party, one culture or one country. Union with God, expressed in baptism, anchors us in God's character and God's dream for the world.

Moving toward that dream, we take three steps forward and two steps back. More often than not. Some of us may feel like we are on the back foot right now in our personal lives, our political lives, or otherwise. The good news is Jesus' word still stands: "Behold I make all things new." Yes, the river of mercy flows into the ocean of God's grace that is deeper than all the ways we mess up personally and collectively. Jesus makes all things new. He does *not* just keep making all new things. It's about taking what is already there, as messed up and broken as it may be, and making it new. On the day of Jesus' baptism his first step was watery, his first word opened the floodgates bringing renewal, revisioning to his people, God's chosen.

What about us, today? What needs refreshing, renewing, revisioning for you, right now? Come touch the water and be made new. I will close with this "Morning Offering" by John O'Donohue:

*All that is eternal in me,  
Welcomes the wonder of this day,  
The field of brightness it creates  
Offering time for each thing  
To arise and illuminate...  
May my mind come alive today*

*To the invisible geography  
That invites me to new frontiers,  
To break the dead shell of yesterdays,  
To risk being disturbed and changed.  
May I have the courage today  
To live the life that I would love,  
To postpone my dream no longer,  
But do at last what I came here for  
And waste my heart on fear no more.<sup>i</sup>*

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<sup>i</sup> John O'Donohue, 'A Morning Offering,' *Benedictus*, (Transworld Digital, Kindle Edition, 2009), Kindle Locations 344-363.